

An Overview of the ESOL Pathfinder Evaluation

Douglas Dalziel
Taylor Nelson Sofres

*An Overview of the ESOL Pathfinder
Evaluation*

*Douglas Dalziel
Taylor Nelson Sofres*

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

© Taylor Nelson Sofres 2005
ISBN 1 84478 383 9

CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations.....	3
1. INTRODUCTION	4
Purpose of the overview	4
Background	4
The ESOL pathfinder evaluation	8
2. SETTING UP THE PATHFINDERS	10
Teachers	11
Materials and resources.....	13
Diagnostic assessment materials.....	14
Individual learning plans	14
Testing	15
3. LEARNERS.....	16
Learner recruitment.....	16
Learner diversity	16
Previous education	17
Learner motivation	18
Class size.....	18
Teaching hours and duration	19
Problems encountered on the course	19
Outcomes.....	20
Course improvement.....	20
4. PATHFINDER STAKEHOLDERS.....	22
Increased cooperation	22
Community groups.....	22
Colleges	22
Private sector	23
Employers	23
5. STRANDS.....	24
Embedded and vocational learning.....	24
Low literacy	25
ICT	25
Outreach	26
Intensives.....	26
Jobcentre Plus	26
Training teachers	27
6. CONCLUSIONS.....	28
Testing the core ESOL teaching and learning infrastructure	28
Developing and investigating a range of delivery models	29
Disseminating effective practice to other teachers and providers.....	29
7. RECOMMENDATIONS.....	31

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABSSU: Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (part of DfES)
ACE: Adult Continuing Education
ACL: Adult Continuing Learning
BET: Basic Employability Training
CD-ROM: Compact Disc – Read Only Memory
DfEE: Department for Education and Employment
DfES: Department for Education and Skills
EFL: English as a Foreign Language
ELLIS: English Language Learning Instructional Services
ESOL: English for Speakers of Other Languages
FE: Further Education
HE: Higher Education
IAG: Information, Advice and Guidance
ICT: Information and Communications Technology
ILP: Individual Learning Plan
LSC: Learning and Skills Council
LSDA: Learning and Skills Development Agency
PGCE: Post Graduate Certificate in Education
TALENT: Training Adult Literacy, ESOL and Numeracy Teachers
TEFL: Teaching English as a Foreign Language

1. INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the overview

The purpose of this overview is to pull together information presented in the qualitative and quantitative reports on the ESOL Pathfinders into a single document. This overview highlights the key findings from both elements of the research and identifies the key conclusions and recommendations.

Background

In 'Skills for Life' the government articulated the high priority they have attached to raising participation and attainment in literacy, language and numeracy skills. As part of the government's delivery of the Skills for Life strategy, the ESOL Pathfinders were launched in 2002 in 10 locations across England (with a separate Pathfinder for HM Prison Service).

Developments within the strategy have included:

- Introducing the national core curriculum for ESOL
- Developing and delivering intensive training for ESOL teachers who work for more than six hours per week
- Commissioning a new assessment tool and linked training for teachers
- Work to map ESOL materials onto the ESOL curriculum

The aims of the Pathfinders included:

- Testing the core teaching and learning infrastructure for adults whose first language is not English
- Developing and investigating a range of delivery models to meet the needs of different ESOL learner groups
- Disseminating effective practice to other teachers and providers

Bids were invited from a comprehensive range of local organisations and consortia during the summer of 2002 to become Pathfinders. Successful bids were based in:

Buckinghamshire and Norfolk, Burnley and Pendle, East London and Lewisham, Exeter and Plymouth, Liverpool, Blackburn and the Wirral, South Thames, South East Coastal Counties

(Thanet/Medway/East Sussex), Walsall and Birmingham Core Skills, West London, West Yorkshire, and Her Majesty's Prisons.

Individual Pathfinders differed appreciably by design. They covered very different parts of the country, and included different groups of partners. Each Pathfinder was encouraged to develop activities across a wide range of provision types or “strands”. Pathfinders developed their own mix of strands that they went on to develop, resource and implement (see Table1). Within each Pathfinder a proportion of their activities would, for example, emphasise ICT-based solutions, while others concentrated on intensive or vocational approaches to ESOL training.

Table 1: Distribution of Main 'Strand' Activity

Pathfinders	ICT	Intensives	Vocational	Low Literacy	Jobcentre Plus	Working with Other Agencies	Outreach	Training Teachers/ Mentors	Embedded ESOL	Flexible Delivery	Other
Buckinghamshire and Norfolk	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√
Burnley & Pendle		√	√			√			√		
East London & Lewisham	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Exeter and Plymouth	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Prisons	√	√									
Liverpool, Blackburn & the Wirral	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√
South East Coastal Counties	√			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
South Thames	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Walsall with Birmingham	√	√			√		√	√	√	√	
West London						√	√	√			
West Yorkshire	√	√		√	√	√	√		√	√	√

Source: TALENT (ESOL) web site for all except West London; source for West London: DfES

Pathfinders were typically led by FE colleges or Local Learning Partnerships – although the Exeter and Plymouth area was rather different because of the leading role played by the local Council for Voluntary Service. There was some variation at a local level, but typical partnership representation centred on colleges, Adult and Community Learning, Jobcentre Plus, Connexions, adult guidance, and various voluntary groups and networks (particularly those supporting refugees and asylum seekers). Other ‘umbrella’ organisations played varying parts depending on the strength of existing local links and established working arrangements. Trades Unions, local employers and a range of other bodies also took an active part in several Pathfinders.

Within the Prison Pathfinder six different institutions took part. Teaching staff were largely drawn from FE college-based providers working in partnership with individual governors and their staff. As the prisons were widely dispersed geographically this tended to restrict opportunities for staff to meet and the challenge of sharing learning across sites was considerably greater. In practice, high levels of local autonomy seems to have been agreed at an early stage: nevertheless periodic contact between the different institutions and with Offenders Learning and Skills Unit (OLSU) was an important feature in the design that facilitated exchanging ideas and developing common practices. Particular prison service characteristics undoubtedly complicate and constrain what can be achieved. If, for example, learners are moved to other institutions (or released/deported) at short notice, achieving good levels of learning and continuity inevitably becomes difficult, particularly as learning records have not to date been transferred between institutions.

ABSSU originally intended Pathfinders to run up until June/July of 2003, but in many cases late starting of some strands at a local level made this target difficult to achieve. To overcome such issues, ABSSU agreed on a Pathfinder-by-Pathfinder basis to extend agreed periods of operation. Funding was not increased, but the time to spend allocated funds was extended. This flexibility was very much appreciated by individual Pathfinders and it certainly contributed considerably to achieving better results at a local level, and much higher levels of learning overall, than would have been the case if initial plans had been strictly adhered to.

The ESOL Pathfinder Evaluation

In November 2002, the DfES commissioned TNS to carry out the evaluation of the ESOL Pathfinders. The evaluation consisted of two parts. The first part comprised a qualitative evaluation with a wide range of personnel from the Pathfinder. The purpose of the evaluation was to provide information on good practice, in order to feed into the national ESOL strategy. In total 111 interviews were conducted at Wave 1 and 137 interviews were conducted at wave 2 with a variety of Pathfinders and their partners (see Table 2). TNS worked alongside CRG Research to conduct this part of the evaluation.

Table 2. Interviewees in Local Pathfinders – Two Main Data Collection ‘Waves’.

	Wave 1	Wave 2
Pathfinder Co-ordinators, Managers	32	33
Partners	45	53
Teachers, support workers, outreach workers	34	51

An additional small scale follow up exercise was arranged in February and March 2004 which involved a visit to each of the Pathfinder co-ordinators to discuss any subsequent developments.

The second part involved conducting a quantitative evaluation of the learners' experiences (The Learners' Survey). This consisted of self-completion questionnaires sent to learners at two waves. The first wave took place "in-class" and the second wave of questionnaires was despatched approximately six months later to learners either by post, e-mail or via the training providers. In total 2746 questionnaires were completed at the first wave and 700 at the second wave (see Table 3). Due to the difficulties re-contacting detainees within the Prison Pathfinder only information collected at the first wave was available.

Table 3. Interviewees in Local Pathfinders – Two Main Data Collection ‘Waves’.

	Wave 1	Wave 2
Learners’ Survey questionnaires completed	2746	700

2. SETTING UP THE PATHFINDERS

Pathfinder managers and co-ordinators were responsible for putting together the initial application to take part in the ESOL Pathfinders. At this stage most had fairly clear plans about the scope and scale of activities as well as the potential providers and partners that would participate in the Pathfinder. There appeared to be a mix of motivations for applying to take part and a wide range of anticipated benefits. The majority of Pathfinder managers saw it as an opportunity to trial new activities, and to explore different approaches to delivering ESOL teaching locally. The opportunity to work closely with other Pathfinders and the DfES was also considered to be a very attractive aspect of the Pathfinder programme. A number of managers and teachers also considered that it was a valuable opportunity to expand their range of service provision. All the Pathfinders reported valuable early support from the DfES in assisting them to scope out the Pathfinder and to turn their initial plans into action.

A great deal of planning activity got underway, as Pathfinders began to work out the practicalities of delivering new elements of their provision. Most Pathfinders also began to meet with the various partners they had included in their plans to discuss exactly how the Pathfinder would be rolled out. Most Pathfinders drew on existing partnerships or at least well-established working relationships. Some began to forge new links with partners that they had not previously worked with. Pathfinders reported that the opportunity to form new partnerships was a very positive element of the Pathfinder.

These early discussions with partners often required more time than Pathfinders had initially planned for, as they had not only to learn about their new partners capabilities and capacities but also to negotiate their precise involvement in the Pathfinder. Inevitably, post-bid discussions led in some cases to significant changes in the final arrangements for partnership working. Many Pathfinders pointed out that partnership working was time-consuming and that it needed to be carefully planned and managed. In most cases the Pathfinder was important in building positive relationships with new partners and in strengthening relationships with existing partners.

A number of Pathfinders experienced delays in getting started often because of the need to recruit one or more dedicated staff to coordinate or manage the Pathfinder. As the size and scope of the Pathfinder activities varied considerably, each developed different ways of managing the programme of activities and the input of partners. In some cases Pathfinders developed fairly detailed project management plans and monitoring approaches.

Teachers

One of the criteria at the bidding stage was that the Pathfinders should have sufficient teachers trained in the use of the ESOL core curriculum. However, some Pathfinders initially faced challenges in recruiting enough appropriately qualified staff. Successful efforts were made to recruit new staff and to encourage existing staff to increase their hours. Within the Prison Pathfinder there were considerable additional challenges in terms of resourcing ESOL classes, as operational issues within the prisons often resulted in changes to the teaching timetable. In the end, the availability of teaching staff did not, overall, inhibit Pathfinder activities. However, several teachers and coordinators suggested that teacher recruitment and development would continue to be an issue, particularly in areas where demand for ESOL teaching is likely to increase.

The DfES requirement for a level 4 qualification for Adult ESOL subject specialists received strong support in colleges. Non-FE providers were more circumspect in their views about new qualifications, but accepted that both paid and voluntary teachers would need to be appropriately qualified. Most of the teachers we spoke to were very positive about gaining further training and qualifications.

ESOL teachers tended to come from a fairly wide range of backgrounds. Some had started teaching in schools and subsequently moved into ESOL teaching. Others had previously worked in adult education teaching literacy and numeracy. A number had also come from EFL backgrounds.

Most teachers had five years or more experience of ESOL teaching, and a number had twenty years or more. Newer teachers in general tended to have received more formal training and qualifications than the more experienced teachers. Most managers recognised that a variety of teaching experience was positive and that qualified

experienced teachers often have a range of knowledge and contacts to draw on which can be invaluable when working with ESOL learners.

At the initial wave of interviews a number of teachers expressed concerns about the various changes in teacher qualifications, the new ESOL learning materials and the introduction of new diagnostic assessment tools. Some felt that the pace of change was too rapid and that they did not have sufficient time to take on board all of the changes. A number were also worried about the likely impact on them and their teaching. However, by the second wave of interviews, these concerns had largely disappeared. Most of the training providers had briefed staff on the changes and had begun to manage their impact. Many of the providers had developed approaches to tackle teachers' concerns such as more frequent staff meetings, briefing, and even local newsletters. In some Pathfinders, colleges responded very positively by providing child care and offering financial allowances to sessional teachers to attend development programmes or to allow time for teachers to familiarise themselves with the new materials. Within the Prison Pathfinder numbers of ESOL teachers at any one location were small and this made it particularly difficult to set up local level teacher training and development activities. Attempts were made however to access development for teachers through existing FE provision.

New training and support arrangements triggered through the Pathfinders were well received. Early reactions to the new curriculum were also generally positive, although as many managers pointed out, a medium-term programme of mapping existing courses onto the new curriculum was only just beginning.

However there were two exceptions to this generally positive picture. Firstly there was concern from teachers about the late arrival of national diagnostic assessment materials. To some extent this prompted the development and enhancement of existing local materials. It also encouraged increased sharing of these new materials. The second exception concerns the new opportunities the Pathfinder provided for some teachers to make more use of IT in their teaching. We were surprised to find generally low levels of confidence in using IT among teachers. At least initially this did inhibit some teachers helping learners make use of CD-ROMs, the internet and e-mail applications. In

response to this, the DfES commissioned the LSDA to improve the extent and effectiveness of the use of e-learning by ESOL teachers.

Materials and resources

Individual partners started their involvement with Pathfinders with varying levels of existing materials and resources. Most had access to a wide range of ESOL teaching materials, lesson plans and assessment tools. The position on access to IT resources was much less consistent, and often there were real problems finding suitable equipment, at least in the early stages. The other major challenge was the scarcity of teaching accommodation. Many Pathfinders found that existing accommodation was fully booked and where possible they had to re-negotiate and re-structure timetables in order to provide suitable space.

During the life of the Pathfinder, as has already been mentioned, major work took place across all Pathfinders developing new materials and mapping these onto the new curriculum. Many of the Pathfinders were very active in sharing materials and disseminating good practice, both within the Pathfinder and between Pathfinders. Within the Prison Pathfinder it was often necessary to tailor additional material to appropriately reflect the setting, and there was some evidence of both practices and materials being shared between different institutions as the Pathfinder Programme progressed.

Many ESOL practitioners acknowledged benefits from access to a wider choice of learning materials, many of which were considered to be of high quality. The approach to internal sharing and dissemination varied, but often this involved holding occasional meetings with ESOL staff, or using or developing local newsletters. Dissemination was further facilitated by regular monthly meetings organised by the DfES to bring together Pathfinder representatives. Typically these meetings involved both updates on a range of issues and a substantial session in each meeting was devoted to a workshop on a particular theme. The ABSSU team also provided support and information to Pathfinders on potential areas of sharing good practice.

In addition, the East London and Lewisham Pathfinder made available a site on the TALENT website for ESOL to enable all Pathfinders to share materials and to act as a discussion forum. In the early stages some Pathfinders reported difficulties navigating the website and the DfES invested in a substantial reorganisation of the material and an improved navigation system. Since then, the website has continued to expand its content and remains an active resource for a wider audience of ESOL teachers and managers.

ELLIS software (a learning package available on CD-ROM) was made available to a number of the Pathfinders, and uptake was good. Often ELLIS was used in conjunction with other software resources. ELLIS was evaluated by a number of Pathfinders and in general was found to be a very useful adjunct to other ICT packages.

Diagnostic assessment materials

There were high expectations that the national diagnostic assessment materials would be available relatively early in the life of the Pathfinders. When they were late to arrive, teachers and managers were disappointed. A small number of teachers were concerned that their existing techniques might not be sufficiently robust. In a number of cases it was necessary for Pathfinders to develop their own diagnostic assessment materials which were specifically targeted at new activities they were trialling.

When the national diagnostic assessment materials became available late in the summer of 2003 they were greatly appreciated, and initial feedback was generally positive.

Individual Learning Plans

Pathfinders were keen to develop Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) for learners and a variety of different approaches and models were successfully tested. Examples of ILPs were made available on the TALENT (ESOL) website.

Testing

Putting learners forward for the national test provoked significant apprehension amongst some Pathfinders in the early stages. The main concerns were about the appropriateness of the material for ESOL learners (especially items with UK cultural content) and the limited experience many ESOL learners had of formal tests. However by the second wave of interviews these concerns had reduced. A number of Pathfinders looked at ways of preparing ESOL learners for the test, and a summary of important lessons learned from administering the test were identified by the West Yorkshire Pathfinder and are reproduced in the main report. Pathfinders' overall views following the national test remained complex. One issue that came to light was the apparent inconsistency with other tests and with teacher assessments (as has been indicated in the Liverpool local evaluation report). Further work on these technical matters is currently being addressed by the QCA and awarding bodies.

3. LEARNERS

Learner recruitment

In most cases Pathfinders were able to recruit at least as many learners as they required. In a number of the Pathfinders there was a significant expansion of ESOL activities and recruiting learners to these new activities took time to build momentum in some of the Pathfinders. This was particularly the case with the development of Intensive classes. However, in some areas learner demand for places far outstripped available provision. Similarly, within the Prison Pathfinder there were high levels of demand for ESOL training.

A range of new programmes were developed by many of the Pathfinders to cater for perceived demand that had not been fully met through existing provision. Providers largely used “word of mouth” rather than more formal marketing to attract learners. This involved alerting existing learners as well as partners to new activities. The majority of learners (58 per cent) also reported that they had found out about their course from family and friends, and around one quarter (28 per cent) said they had become aware of the course at a college or training centre. Relatively small proportions (10 per cent) reported that they had found out about the course via a government office or agency, and fewer still through advertising.

Learner diversity

All ESOL Pathfinder partners stressed the extraordinary variety of learner characteristics, and that making generalisations about the typical ESOL learner was difficult. The diversity of learners was clear from the information they provided in the Learner Survey. Overall in the sample of learners who participated in the survey, females slightly outnumbered men by six to four. Around half of the learners were aged under thirty years with the largest single age band being twenty-five to twenty-nine years. There were relatively few learners aged fifty years or more. Half were married or living with a partner. Slightly less than half said that their partner was in work (44 per cent). Four in ten of the learners said they had one child or more living with them at home. Providers were particularly aware of the challenges supporting children at home

presented for a number of their learners. Within the Prison Pathfinder seven in ten ESOL learners were male (68 per cent). Almost half (45 per cent) were under thirty years of age, one third (35 per cent) were aged between thirty and forty-nine, and only seven per cent of learners were aged fifty or older, while 14 per cent did not state their age. Fewer learners were married (39 per cent), and more of this group had been in the UK for less than a year.

Learners came from a very large number of ethnic groups with small numbers of learners scattered across a large range of ethnic groups. The four largest groups were relatively equal in size and accounted for six in ten learners. They were, in order of size: White Other (16 per cent), African (15 per cent), Pakistani (13 per cent) and Other Asian (13 per cent). The Learner Survey revealed over fifty-four different first languages spoken by learners, again with small numbers of learners scattered over a large range of languages. The largest single groups with around one in ten in each were Urdu (10 per cent) and Punjabi (8 per cent). Amongst detainees in the prisons 32% indicated that they belonged to the White Other ethnic group. 12 per cent were Caribbean and 11 per cent African, followed by a range of other ethnic groups. Almost half of detainees (45%) spoke a European language, followed by an Asian language (17 per cent) and a Caribbean language (14 per cent).

Previous education

One of the major challenges for teachers was managing classes in which there were very varied levels of previous education. The overall mean age at which learners started education was six and half years old, and the overall mean age for finishing education was just over fifteen years old. Over half of learners (58%) had eleven or more years of education, with 23 per cent having more than fifteen years in education. One in five learners had seven or less years of education, with one in twenty having no formal education at all. Males were slightly more likely than females to have no qualifications as were learners aged over fifty years. The vast majority of learners' attitudes to their previous education were good or very good.

Self reported skills in learners' first language varied considerably. Around one in twenty learners said they could not read or write in their own language. An additional one in ten reported some difficulties reading and a similar proportion reported some difficulties writing in their language. In general, those in the Prison Pathfinder reported slightly less difficulties with two per cent saying they could not read in their first language.

Learner motivation

Individual learners reported a variety of motivations for starting ESOL courses. The largest proportion of learners said that they had started the course to help them with everyday tasks, such as writing and filling in forms: (86 per cent of learners considering this to be a very or fairly important factor). Almost as many considered that the course would help them to improve their overall confidence. Many also reported that their current course was a stepping-stone to another course. For just over two thirds of learners (70 per cent), getting more involved in their community or neighbourhood was a reason for starting the course. The potential for financial gain was mentioned less frequently, just over one half thought this to be important.

Class size

Class sizes varied depending on the type of provision and the demand. The most commonly reported class sizes by both Pathfinders and learners were between 11 – 15 students. A few teachers reported deliberately oversubscribing classes in the beginning to maintain reasonable numbers after the initial anticipated drop-off in numbers attending. Maximum class sizes in these cases were around 20 students. In practice it was common for actual numbers of learners to fall below 10 as many learners were unable to attend every class. In some cases, teachers reported that learners found it difficult to regularly attend because of personal issues such as child care or other issues such as problems with health or accommodation.

Teaching hours and duration

Just over one half of the learners said that they were receiving between five and fifteen hours of teaching a week and around one quarter were receiving between five and ten hours a week. Those in the Prison Pathfinder tended to have more hours of teaching per week: half were receiving 16 hours or more per week. Learners receiving only a small number of teaching hours per week tended to be less satisfied with their learning.

Course length varied between very short intensives which might span a weekend to courses that ran for over two or more academic terms. Two thirds of learners were on courses of more than twenty weeks duration, while most of the remainder were on courses between five and nineteen weeks. By contrast those on the Prison Pathfinder were on shorter courses: half reported that they were on courses of four weeks or less.

Learners on courses of 20 weeks or more were more likely to spend longer hours per week receiving teaching than those on shorter courses, with the exception of the Intensives course (such as those in the Prison Pathfinder). For example, almost half (49 per cent) of those on courses of 20 weeks or more spent more than 11 hours per week on their course, compared with just less than a third (27 per cent) of those on courses of between five and ten weeks.

Problems encountered on the course

Learners faced a number of difficulties related to their studies. The most common problem reported was financial constraints: one third reported that finding the money to buy books and stationery was a problem. Slightly fewer learners reported problems finding time to study because of family commitments. The third most frequently mentioned problem was the lack of accommodation at home to study. Amongst the learners in the Prison Pathfinder accommodation was the biggest problem, followed by finding time to study.

From a teaching perspective there were a number of additional problems. As a result of the dispersal process some learners suddenly and unexpectedly ceased attending classes. Other learners had difficulties attending, due to appointments with the Home Office or other agencies.

Outcomes

Learners reported a number of benefits as a result of the course. Here the outcomes are reported for the 700 respondents who completed the second wave questionnaire.

At the second wave, around nine in ten learners considered that their English had improved as a result of the course. Similar levels of improvement were found when spoken, written and reading competences were asked about separately. Around one third of learners said they had taken the National Literacy Test while one quarter took another test. At the second wave, half of the learners said they had completed their course, one third were still on the course and one in ten admitted to having left the course early. Drop out rates were almost double for those on courses over twenty hours per week or courses under two hours a week. Teachers reported that learners sometimes dropped out because they were suddenly dispersed to another part of the country or because they experienced too many family or social difficulties.

The majority of learners, including those in the Prison Pathfinders, reported that the course had helped them improve their self-confidence; and had helped them tackle everyday tasks like reading and writing letters and filling in forms.

There was no overall change in the proportions of learners at the second wave in full time employment when compared with the same people at the first wave. There was however a small rise in the numbers in part-time employment. The biggest change however was a 9% reduction in the proportions who were unemployed and claiming benefit – down to less than one in five. However, the total picture is somewhat unclear as many more respondents preferred not to indicate their working status. There are a number of possible reasons why this could be the case. It could be that some of these respondents are in employment and choosing not to indicate this is the case.

Course improvement

Learners were asked about possible improvements to the course at the second wave. At the top of their list was more contact time with teachers – a view that was shared by a

number of teachers who felt more time with learners would be beneficial. Learners were also keen to have longer courses, particularly those on short courses of two weeks or learners with less than four hours of teaching contact per week. Around a quarter of learners also wanted to have more access to computers.

4. PATHFINDER STAKEHOLDERS

This section will examine the views of those involved in the Pathfinder (such as teachers, managers, Pathfinder co-ordinators and partners) towards partnerships.

Increased cooperation

Overall partners' experiences of the ESOL Pathfinder have been positive. Most Pathfinders set up a steering group or management group to review their progress and to advise and support Pathfinder development. There is clear evidence from the interviews that the ESOL Pathfinders have had an impact beyond the training providers. Many Pathfinders brought together a wide variety of partners and other stakeholders from both the statutory and non-statutory sectors. This provided an important opportunity for a variety of agencies to discuss and share thinking about local ESOL provision. In some cases this group has assisted in the development and planning of local ESOL provision strategies.

Community groups

Many community and voluntary groups have been active and enthusiastic participants in the Pathfinders, in a variety of roles. Most frequently they have been active in outreach work and contacting groups who have typically been very hard to reach in relation to conventional learning activities. The Exeter and Plymouth Pathfinder provides an important case study in how voluntary and community groups can take a leading role in managing and coordinating ESOL provision.

Colleges

Colleges within the Pathfinders have had the opportunity to increase their teacher training, develop new learning materials, increase the range of courses they offer and generally develop their ESOL capacity as part of the Pathfinders. There have been a number of positive examples of local colleges cooperating more effectively, and sharing information amongst each other. Since the development of the TALENT (ESOL) website

there has also been the opportunity to disseminate learning and share experiences with a wider pool of colleges and other partners.

Private sector

Private sector learning provision associated with the Pathfinders was mainly limited to delivering BET courses on contract to Jobcentre Plus (e.g. in East London and Walsall). This provision is well established and no major problems were encountered in aligning Pathfinder activities with it.

Employers

There was clear evidence that some employers can be very supportive of effective ESOL delivery. Numerous case studies of successful partnerships have been documented by the Pathfinders. Those employers who did support the Pathfinders mainly sought ESOL learning relevant for specific jobs (for example in the agriculture business in those Pathfinders working in Norfolk and East Sussex). With highly mobile workforces such as those in these business sectors practical difficulties in delivering programmes have been a significant challenge to overcome.

In the Burnley Pathfinder, health sector employers were involved more widely as this project sought to address opportunities for helping ESOL learners develop the skills needed to gain work in that sector. In other cases, for example within the catering trade in Liverpool, individual employers have been prepared to act as a focal point for contacting potential learners employed by others. However, employers' views do vary, and the task of winning the commitment of some employers will remain a significant challenge.

5. STRANDS

From the outset, Pathfinders were encouraged to develop activities across a wide range of provision types (or “strands”). The Learners’ survey revealed that around one third of learners attended standard “core” ESOL sessions (27 per cent) and the remainder participated in one of the strands. Embedded and Vocational ESOL accounted for one quarter (28 per cent) of provision by learner numbers, and around one in ten attended ESOL for learners with low levels of literacy. Significant numbers of learners also attended strands which focused on ICT and ELLIS, Outreach, Intensives, and Jobcentre Plus. In addition one of the strands focused on training teachers and mentors.

Embedded and vocational learning

Most Pathfinders reported positive experiences of offering embedded and vocational learning. Many colleges embedded ESOL provision within established FE programmes (including childcare, hairdressing, catering, and photography) so that learners gained directly applicable language skills at the same time as they gained or developed useful knowledge and skills. It is worth noting that programmes like ESOL and sewing, ESOL and swimming were effective, not only in attracting learners into programmes, but in encouraging good levels of attainment.

West Yorkshire and Birmingham were amongst those developing ‘double qualification’ programmes – with learners able to gain both vocational (e.g. NVQ2) qualifications and English language accreditation through the national test.

The Pathfinder allowed the opportunity to trial classes with two teachers – one to cover the ‘technical’ aspects of the course itself, the other with specific ESOL skills - but this clearly represents an appreciable extra cost. In some of the Pathfinders they were exploring the possibilities of using trained classroom assistants rather than fully qualified teachers in one of these roles.

Close links with the health sector were a particular feature of the Burnley Pathfinder; and while short-term achievements have so far been limited, those working in the Pathfinder

remain confident that a number of local people can be helped to gain work in the health sector in future.

Low Literacy

It was always envisaged that low levels of own-language literacy would be a significant issue for Pathfinders to address. However the extent of low literacy and the challenges it represented were appreciably greater than most expected. Careful diagnostic assessment has emerged as an essential element of good practice, so that, for example, barriers caused by no writing skills, no ability to recognise any characters, or no experience of formal learning settings can be identified and addressed.

Key findings from the Pathfinder were, first, that the scale of low own-language literacy problems were very significant indeed, and secondly that people with these characteristics were not necessarily easy to help through 'conventional' taught courses. Effective learning plans that address low own-language literacy are likely to be time consuming and resource intensive.

ICT

Despite initial practical difficulties, such as limited computers and software problems, Pathfinders' experiences of using ICT-based learning opportunities were amongst the most positive outcomes. A wide range of approaches including the use of ELLIS software, networked ICT equipment in a classroom setting, electronic whiteboards, and the use of laptops were trialled and found to have a variety of positive learning outcomes. Many learners found ICT-based learning attractive for a variety of reasons: it was new and different, they liked the opportunity to familiarise themselves with ICT-related skills, and it provided a very flexible approach. In particular it was paced according to the learners' own needs and skills and it avoided problems if sessions were unavoidably missed.

Outreach

A wide variety of outreach activities were planned and implemented. During the length of the Pathfinder a range of new activities were successfully developed. In terms of formal outreach work, the role of community and faith-based organisations emerged as important for many communities. Uptake by certain hard to reach groups was particularly successful as learners were often familiar with the community or faith-based providers. In some cases learners signed up for more than one programme and this presented a challenge to providers to manage the provision effectively.

Other activities focused on learners who would not typically access traditional college-based learning. Pathfinders reported success in a variety of areas, particularly those areas where cooperation with employers was possible. Tailored programmes were developed in a number of areas including courses for learners employed in the restaurant trade.

Intensives

For some learners, intensive provision has been very attractive indeed. Younger people, particularly those with good levels of own-language literacy and numeracy, have responded well to intensive provision. Pathfinders have also reported additional 'soft' benefits, including enhanced networking, and building up the learners' self-confidence and motivation. Feedback from learners on residential intensive programmes has been particularly positive in terms of both learning and social skill outcomes. Within the Prison Pathfinder intensive provision was considered by many of the teachers as a particularly effective approach to minimising disruption from relocations and releases and maintaining learner interest and motivation.

Jobcentre Plus

Most Pathfinders worked closely with Jobcentre Plus staff, whether this was part of a formal 'strand' or not. Activities centred on three elements: effective referring-on to appropriate support, training Jobcentre Plus staff, and supporting Jobcentre Plus funded

programmes. Training Jobcentre Plus front-line staff led to good results in several areas (especially Liverpool). This in turn led to more effective referring-on to support and IAG services.

The fit between 'standard' Jobcentre Plus requirements and ESOL learners' needs and circumstances is not always easy, however. Whilst formal programmes (primarily BET) seemingly can work well for many learners with limited English skills, this is far from universally the case. Some experimenting around 'standard' approaches was possible through the Pathfinders (e.g. providing additional ESOL support as part of BET in East London) and did seem to show promising results.

Training teachers

Many teachers reported that during the life of the Pathfinder, there were increased opportunities for established ESOL teachers to undertake accredited professional development. Feedback from specific teaching activities was typically good: in many cases, teachers' interests centred on group learning and extending their own skill proficiency and self-confidence in their role. Many established teachers often reported a significant 'backlog' of training and development, and Pathfinder activities resolved a proportion of this backlog.

6. CONCLUSIONS

At the outset it is important to note that the ESOL Pathfinders have achieved considerable benefits for both learners and the Pathfinders. The ESOL Pathfinders have been successful not only in addressing the overall aims of the programme, but in the process, they have also delivered a strong sense of cooperation and collaboration between partners. In this section we present our conclusions around the key aims of the ESOL Pathfinders.

Testing the core ESOL teaching and learning infrastructure

A major aim of the ESOL Pathfinder was to test the core teaching and learning infrastructure for adults whose first language is not English. The Pathfinders have been able to achieve this across a wide range of settings (including FE colleges, in a variety of outreach settings, in Jobcentre Plus and in Prisons). There has been wide acceptance of the new infrastructure and much work was undertaken to map existing materials onto the new curriculum. Changes in teaching and learner qualifications have also been generally welcomed across the board, particularly where there have been opportunities for additional training and development. New materials including diagnostic assessment materials although late to arrive have also been received positively.

The Learner Survey not only confirms that this aim has been successfully achieved, but provides evidence that the range of learners who have been involved in testing the infrastructure has been very broad. Indeed, the diversity of the population that have been involved with the ESOL Pathfinder has been a major achievement. This diversity however means that few assumptions can safely be made in advance about the personal characteristics of learners (such as their age or gender), their family or living situation (such as their marital status, presence of children or type of living accommodation), their previous learning experience, or their occupational status.

Developing and investigating a range of delivery models

ESOL Pathfinders have developed and tested a very broad range of delivery models. In turn this has contributed to the wide range of learners that have been attracted to ESOL learning, many of whom have come from hard to reach groups. There have been a number of notable successes in this area. In particular the work of many of the Pathfinders in outreach and also in learning that has involved employers, has been an important development.

It has been clear from the Learner Survey that a wide range of Strands have been tested. Significant numbers of learners have been involved in non-core ESOL programmes. In particular, embedded ESOL programmes have been extensively developed and trialled. Many learners have also participated in programmes aimed at learners with low levels of literacy, across a range of different geographical locations. A similar picture of activity on ICT approaches with groups of learners across a variety of locations can also be reported. There has also been encouraging numbers of learners involved in intensive and outreach programmes of learning. Many learners have also had the opportunity to access other approaches such as vocational learning and learning linked with Jobcentre Plus.

Local trialling and evaluation has produced a wealth of information on the key lessons appropriate to specific approaches. Overall the key message is that different learners will be attracted to, and respond differently to different learning programmes, and that generalisations about this group of learners can be misleading. Delivering tailored approaches has clear advantages, but the mix between what is feasible and the resources required is a decision that needs to be carefully considered.

Disseminating effective practice to other teachers and providers

Throughout the life of the Pathfinder, those involved in the management and delivery of ESOL learning have been keen to disseminate their learning. Not only has this involved sharing pedagogic knowledge, it has also extended to sharing experience of evaluation and research. Regular meetings organised by the DfES in London and many other contacts initiated by the Pathfinders have been used to develop a wider understanding

and use of evaluation methods. The TALENT (ESOL) website has been an important tool in disseminating different approaches to evaluation and has undoubtedly contributed to improved practice.

Pathfinder staff have been enthusiastic to share materials, experiences and ideas and this has contributed in no small measure to the overall success of the ESOL Pathfinders.

By the end of the Pathfinder partnership working has emerged as a significant strength for many Pathfinders – particularly through forging links with organisations like Jobcentre Plus, employers and community groups who were not always linked effectively into learning programmes in the past.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The supply of appropriately qualified ESOL teachers has been a considerable challenge to managers and coordinators in a number of the ESOL Pathfinder organisations. It is likely that the demand for teachers will increase as more learners make use of available learning opportunities. This presents opportunities at local and national levels to both identify requirements in the area, and to provide sufficient training and development opportunities to those new to teaching and those with experience alike. It is clear that there may also be opportunities for other staff, such as teaching assistants and unqualified voluntary staff to make a valuable contribution to the available teaching resource. These staff will also have training and development needs which will need to be provided for.

A major success of the Pathfinders has been a shift to increased partnership working. In some areas this was already good, but in other areas it was limited. While it is recognised that establishing and maintaining effective partnerships can be demanding and time consuming, most Pathfinders have identified many benefits from working together. A number of the Pathfinders have discussed reorganising and reinvigorating their steering groups or management teams to continue to play a role in managing ESOL delivery within their geographical area. In at least one case this has led to the development of a local strategy on ESOL provision. At a local level most Pathfinders have identified opportunities to continue to work with partners. Outside of the Pathfinder areas, it is clear that this approach may be equally valid and there is an on-going need to share experiences of different partnership models that have contributed to effective ESOL delivery. To some extent the widening of access to the TALENT (ESOL) website may provide a useful forum for exchanging views on partnership. However, it may be appropriate at a national level to consider what more might need to be done to encourage this area of good practice.

The TALENT (ESOL) website has in itself been a hugely useful outcome from the ESOL Pathfinders. There remains a genuine need to continue to share information and materials that have worked with particular groups of ESOL learners. There is no doubt that there is a willingness among teachers to share materials. The continued support by teachers for the TALENT (ESOL) website beyond the life of the Pathfinders is indicative

of an on-going need to share information at both a formal and informal level. DfES investment in this channel of communication was certainly welcomed by Pathfinders, and again this needs to be reviewed periodically to consider in what ways this type of communication can be maintained and access widened further.

At a local level there was considerable local evaluation of activities and again these have been widely disseminated through a range of media (including local meetings, local dissemination events, publications and national dissemination events). It is hoped that in time this pool of knowledge can be added to and that further opportunities can be arranged at a local and national level to communicate more recent developments. In particular there are probably opportunities to review on-going developments in diagnostic assessment as well as in each of the different strands of Pathfinder activity.

Many of the Pathfinders have worked hard to mainstream activities that were trialled during the Pathfinder and found to be successful. In some cases this has been done through existing funds, while in other cases Pathfinders have been successful in bidding for additional funding. Many Pathfinders have been able to use their experience of trialling and evaluating new activities to present strong cases for funding. Again we consider that it may be valuable to share information about the success of mainstreaming new activities and the learning that has ensued from this process.

Finally, at a national level, work to develop further materials and to respond to feedback on existing materials will continue to be important. The experience of Pathfinders in trialling diagnostic assessment materials as well as the national test needs to be actively considered in reviewing and improving materials for the future.

Copies of this publication can be obtained from:

DfES Publications
P.O. Box 5050
Sherwood Park
Annesley
Nottingham
NG15 0DJ

Tel: 0845 60 222 60
Fax: 0845 60 333 60
Minicom: 0845 60 555 60
Online: www.dfespublications.gov.uk

© Taylor Nelson Sofres 2005

Produced by the Department for Education and Skills

ISBN 1 84478 383 9
Ref No: RR610
www.dfes.go.uk/research